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Memorandum

Prepared by the Southwest Asia Analytic Center/Iran
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THE STATUS OF IRAN'S NON-MUSLIM MINORITIES

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Non-Muslim religious minorities fear that the continued lack of central control and the development of a strict Shiite Islamic Republic threaten their security despite assurances to the contrary by the Khomeini regime. Except for the Bahais, however, members of Iran's non-Muslim religious communities seem to be relatively safe as long as they are not identified with internal or external forces seen as a threat to the Khomeini regime.

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The small non-Muslim Iranian religious communities -- Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Bahais -- have watched the course of the Islamic revolution and its current plans for a "cultural revolution" with concern. But, although there is considerable prejudice in Iran against members of any ethnic or religious group that is a local minority, there continues to be little evidence that any group, with the exception of the Bahais -- and possibly the Anglicans -- is being systematically harassed. Members of minority communities who emigrate almost always express their concerns in general terms relating to the fervor of Ayatollah Khomeini's followers. Although minority community members are now being regarded with more suspicion by their Shiite neighbors, few emigres can show evidence of specific acts of persecution.

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Political and religious leaders have given public and private assurances that the rights of the Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians will be protected. The Bahais do not receive such guarantees. Shunned by most Muslims and a traditional target for conservative Shias, the Bahais have become even more vulnerable under the Khomeini regime.

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Members of the non-Muslim minority communities realize that it will be some time before the central government can exert its authority throughout Iran and control the activities of the local groups that have taken it upon themselves to harass the religious minorities. They also are concerned that, with Ayatollah Khomeini's increased emphasis on the Islamization of Iran and the potential for even more anarchy after he dies, that no government in Tehran would intervene decisively to aid a minority group.

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Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini knows no equality of religion, but freedom of belief and cultural autonomy are guaranteed. Although the President and high civil servants must be members of the official, Shia, religion, representation in the parliament is also guaranteed to the "official" minorities in the constitution:

The Iranian Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians are the only recognized minorities, who, within the limits of the law, are free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and will act in personal matters and religious teachings in accordance with their religious regulations. Principle 13

According to the Qoran, the Islamic Republican Government of Iran and the Muslims are bound to treat non-Muslims with good moral conduct and Islamic justice, and to observe their fundamental rights. This principle will be applicable to those who do not become involved in anti-Islamic activities and in conspiracies against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Principle 14

Zoroastrians and Jews will each have one representative to the National Consultative Assembly, the Assyrian and Chaldean Christians will together have one representative, and the Armenian Christians of the north and south will each elect one representative...

Principle 64

The representatives of the minorities will take the oath (as a member of the Assembly) by mentioning the name of their holy book...

Principle 67

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Bahais

A campaign against the Bahais began in Iran before the fall of the Shah's regime as his last governments attempted to appear more acceptable to the clerics in the hope of forestalling the revolution. Since late 1978, Bahais have been dismissed from government and military positions; their homes, religious centers and schools have been attacked or appropriated; their bank accounts have been frozen. Some have been killed or executed, largely because of their beliefs; others have been forced to "convert" to Shiism. 25X1

There is no reason to expect that the situation of the Bahais will improve significantly under the Khomeini regime. The Bahais -- estimated by their leaders at "a few hundred thousand" last spring -- are seen as Shia heretics whose religious beliefs are not derived from divine revelation as are Islam, Judaism, and

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Christianity. The Shah's relatively tolerant attitude toward them led to the popular view that the Bahais were associated with the excesses of his regime, especially those of SAVAK. They are also accused of links with Israel by pro-Khomeini activists. [redacted]

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Christians

The most recent estimates indicate there are about one and a half million Christians in Iran: around 100,000 Assyrians and most of the remainder Armenians. With the exception of the Anglicans, as a group, they do not seem to have suffered severely from the excesses of the Islamic revolution. The future of Christian schools -- which have been ordered to close -- is not bright, however, and their permanent closure would have a strongly negative effect on the morale of the Christian communities. The schools have problems not so much because they are run by the Christian community, but because they are seen as centers of western influence and because some of them were well known for educating the children of members of the Shah's regime. Christian hospitals in Esfahan and Shiraz were appropriated by local committees a year ago. [redacted]

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The Iranian Christians may have escaped the attention of the pro-Khomeini zealots because they are mainly artisans, workers, and farm laborers who are well integrated into the society. They have a strong sense of community solidarity and are not objects of envy or jealousy. Leaders of the Christian communities have urged their people to assume a low-profile and not to become identified with criticism of the Khomeini regime. [redacted]

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In the past, both Armenians and Assyrians have been special targets of Soviet propaganda and the Tudeh Party has been well represented among them. If the Khomeini regime should turn against the pro-Soviet left, these communities may become targets. [redacted]

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Jews

The obvious antipathy of the Khomeini regime toward Israel and its support of Palestinian goals -- as well as the prospect of prolonged political and economic uncertainty -- have

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25X1 [redacted] led the Iranian Jewish community to 25X1 subt its place in a conservative Islamic Republic. [redacted]

In the weeks before the Shah fell, an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Jews left Iran and the emigration has continued. According to emigres and Jewish organizations, practically all of the poorer Jews have emigrated to Israel, leaving only the very wealthy or the small and medium scale businessmen and their families. Some -- primarily businessmen -- have returned after settling their families abroad. Estimates of the current size of the Jewish community vary from 35,000 to 75,000 25X1 with the majority living in Tehran and Shiraz. [redacted]

There does not seem to be any official policy of discrimination or persecution of Jews in Iran, but isolated instances have kept the community on edge, especially in Tehran and Shiraz. Some Jewish bureaucrats have been purged from government positions and posts in private businesses, but the Jewish business community itself has suffered no more difficulty than have other elements of the commercial sector. Jewish businessmen passing through Western Europe have told local officials that the shortage of goods in Iran has presented unusually profitable opportunities to businessmen who have large inventories. [redacted] 25X1

Two Jews have been executed for alleged association with Israel and "Zionist conspiracies"; 120 to 130 remain under arrest without charge. An elderly woman was murdered in Shiraz in May 1979. Because of their associations with trade, industry, and financing, Iranian Jews often fall into a category of individuals -- regardless of religious affiliation -- whose activities receive an exceptionally critical investigation from the conservative Islamic authorities. Unfortunately, even when the investigation is centered on such activities, Jews are often also 25X1 --seemingly almost as a matter of routine -- accused of support for Israel and Zionism. [redacted]

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Despite their concerns, there apparently is still a noticeable belief among Iranian Jews that Ayatollah Khomeini intends to follow through on the constitution's guarantees of religious freedom. [redacted]

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Zoroastrians

The community -- of 20,000 to 40,000 living mainly in Tehran -- is worried about its prospects under the Islamic Republic, but there has been no evidence of trouble. About 1,000 -- primarily the most wealthy -- left Iran during the revolution, but by April 1979 they had begun to return. After meeting with Ayatollah Khomeini last year, one Zoroastrian leader commented that his benevolent attitude was probably due to a complete lack of knowledge about their beliefs. The leader noted that he himself was facing personal hardships, but because he had been a member of the National Assembly under the Shah's regime. []

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Zoroastrian leaders have said there has been no violence even at temples located in "disturbed" areas and their people have not been afraid to attend services. They did note that several Zoroastrians have been dismissed from their government posts. It is not clear, however, that they suffered because of their beliefs or whether they were ousted in purges of old-line bureaucrats. []

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